

# Mass in Motion: Stories from the Field

## Opening the Doors of Springfield Gyms for Safe Areas to be Active

In Springfield, there's a lack of places to be physically active. But that's not the only problem, according to Nicole Bourdon: "The even bigger issue is the lack of safe places for people to be active." As Springfield's Mass in Motion Coordinator, Nicole is working alongside many community partners and team members to open school gyms as a safe place for kids and adults to be active.

And the need for a safe place to be active is clear: Springfield has one of the highest obesity rates in Massachusetts. Nicole and her team set out to help Springfield get in shape, starting with the city's youth.

The first step Mass in Motion Springfield took was to map neighborhoods that lacked safe areas for physical activity. Not surprisingly, the neighborhoods lacking safe play areas also had the highest rates of obesity in the city.

Drawing on the existing relationship between the Parks Department and Springfield schools, Mass in Motion Springfield strengthened the partnership by bringing on a City Councilor

and the Springfield Youth Violence Task Force. Together they reviewed Mass in Motion's neighborhood maps, and chose two schools in neighborhoods in need. A member of the Springfield Wellness Leadership Council (formed by Mass in Motion) secured funding from Health New England Insurance. This funding was used to hire four staff members to help run a 3-month evening basketball program for kids.

The Parks Department used a press release and the city's website to promote the program. However, the biggest marketing effort came from the kids themselves. As Paula Thayer, Assistant Director of Springfield Recreation, promised: "if you leave the lights on, the kids will come." Sure enough the gyms were at capacity almost every night.

The open gyms were a hit from the start. Despite very little marketing, a total of almost 100 Springfield kids showed up to play over the three months, with an average of 26 kids between the ages of 5 and 17 participating each night. Many kids were surveyed on their experience:



*School gyms with evenings hours give youth a safe place to be active.*

- » Over half felt the gyms helped them stay out of trouble at school and in their neighborhood.
- » Almost two thirds said if they were not at open gym they would be watching TV or playing video/computer games.
- » Nearly everyone said they felt they were safe at the evening gyms.

Open gyms proved to be a great way to capitalize on existing resources in the community as well as an effective way to provide a safe place for kids to be active. Nicole and her team are already gearing up for this coming winter, and look forward to securing funds to open more gyms for the kids and adults of Springfield.

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